Works Council and union at Ford Saarlouis to enforce plant closure

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As the immediate grief and anger about the planned closure of Ford's long-standing plant in Saarlouis subsides, it is vital to drawn lessons from the experiences of the last years, and the last six months in particular. The jobs are not yet lost, but a fight must be initiated now. But that is exactly what management, the works council, IG Metall union and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) state government want to prevent.

When Ford announced on Wednesday that it would produce its future electric models in Valencia and not in Saarlouis, the 4,600 Saarlouis workers reacted with anger and indignation. However, the works council regards its main task as not to defend the jobs at the plant but only to ensure production continues smoothly until 2025, and guaranteeing the orderly winding down of the plant until then.

That is the bottom line, both from the works meeting, which ran from 7:30 a.m. to nearly 2 p.m. Thursday, and from the numerous press interviews Works Council Chairman Markus Thal has been giving seemingly non-stop since Wednesday.

On Thursday morning, even before the works meeting began, management had spread the statement from Ford's European boss Stuart Rowley, in which he made all sorts of empty promises to his "colleagues." Ford, he said, was working on "concrete alternatives," including parts production for Ford or recycling batteries or electric vehicles, selling the plant to other companies, including other automakers, and "business activities in partnership with the government of the Saarland." All of this is hot air. A worker from the rank-and-file Ford Action Committee immediately denounced all the proposals made by Ford amounted to "cheap-wage work."

At the conclusion of the works meeting, the works council brought in Minister President Anke Rehlinger (SPD) by video as she read her official statement in the state parliament. Ford Europe chief Stuart Rowley had already announced that Ford was "set[ing] up a task force that will concretize the above-mentioned options together with the Saarland state government," she said.

Rehlinger herself criticized the scenarios presented by Ford as being too vague. But she offered nothing more concrete either. She demanded that Ford come up with "its own ideas and proposals" on how "the greatest possible number of jobs can be secured at the site beyond 2025." For employees, the state wanted to set up "a central contact point with all important information" at the state-owned "transformation company."

Auto workers were to be empowered through "skills development and training." The state government was also considering buying the land currently owned by Ford. So that "there is also the possibility that new, future-proof jobs can be created promptly on the current Ford site," Rehlinger said.

In her speech, she also repeated the narrative developed by the works council and IG Metall, that they had been deceived by the company. Rehlinger described the internal bidding war between the Saarlouis plant and its Spanish counterpart in Valencia as unfair and shabby. There is no question that this was the case, but it was not just the company, but also the works council and union that are responsible for pitting Ford workers against each other.

For six months, they sat down twice a week with Ford's top management in Cologne and discussed how they could push down wage costs to the point where they would even be lower than those in Spain. They were prepared to sacrifice workers' jobs at all the other German sites, especially the almost 19,000 employees

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at the Cologne headquarters, in making these cuts. And the works council in Valencia acted in the same way. Workers there will now also have to face job losses, wage reductions and worsening working conditions.

At the works meeting, Thal had said that the Saarlouis offer was €1.4 billion better than the Spanish one. Members of the Ford Action Committee have told the WSWS that they would like to know through what enormous sacrifices on the part of the works council this figure was arrived at. Because the cuts offered to Ford in Saarlouis must include the €1.4 billion in cuts on top of the €1 billion contained in the Spanish offer.

Both Thal and other works council and IG Metall representatives at the works meeting also tried to fob off workers with vague promises and a "social collective agreement" that has yet to be worked out. In an interview with sol.de, Thal said he was "firmly convinced" that things would "somehow continue" in Saarlouis after 2025. Somehow! While the future of the workforce is uncertain, one thing is certain: no IG Metall works council representative will fall into the abyss. They will enjoy a soft landing.

The soporifics and empty promises are intended to persuade workers to keep quiet. While the corporation is using unfair and shabby methods to unscrupulously assert its interests, workers are supposed to calmly and quietly surrender to the fate determined by the corporation and works council.

Workers were visibly affected following the works meeting. On Wednesday, they had heard about the end of their plant and were very worried about themselves and their families' future. On Thursday, their worries were further heightened by the works council. Many workers found it hard to talk about the meeting or make statements, or only with difficulty. In particular, older workers with whom the WSWS spoke immediately after the works meeting, were visibly very upset and sometimes close to tears. One, who had worked at Ford for 35 years, said, "My heart bleeds!"

The initial disappointment and dejection are understandable. But the time to fight back is now, otherwise workers will face the closure of the plant and be fobbed off with "transfer companies" and, at best, lower-paying replacement jobs.

It *is* possible to defend the plant and the jobs, but that requires a break with the unions, the works council and the government, all of which are only interested in keeping workers docile while they organize the liquidation of the factory. The allies of workers at Ford Saarlouis are workers all over the world who are resisting corporate and government attacks everywhere.

Near Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, more than 1,500 Ford workers have been on strike for more than four weeks. In September last year, Ford had announced it would cease operations in India and close its Chennai plant, which employs 4,000, and another in the state of Gujarat.

Indian workers, too, confront a conspiracy by management and the trade unions. Because 1,400 cars are still awaiting completion, Ford has tried to use strikebreakers, increased its severance pay offer and already twice postponed the ultimatum to implement compulsory redundancies.

The Indian unions have only belatedly claimed support for the strike, which was initiated by young workers. And they did so only to be able to stall it in negotiations where they are only advocating higher severance pay. Meanwhile, the unions are categorically rejecting an extension of the strike to the other Ford plant or other factories in the region.

Ford workers in India have a great interest in organising independently and establishing international collaboration. They have already discussed online with colleagues in the US and are keen to exchange ideas with German Ford workers.

In order to defend the Saarlouis plant and jobs, Ford workers in Germany must also seize the initiative. The works council and IG Metall are just as ready as their Indian counterparts to push through the closure of the plant. Ford workers must unite independently and internationally. Contact the Ford Action Committee by sending a **Whatsapp** message to **+491633378340**.

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